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SUBJECT: IRANIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT CLAIMS SUCCESSES AMID IRIG
CRACKDOWN

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Four leading Iranian women's rights activists described a robust, growing movement that is expanding its reach beyond young professional women, despite an aggressive crack-down by hardliners on individual activists. The struggle for women's equality in Iran has become more focused and better organized since the inception of the grass-roots One Million Signatures Campaign two and a half years ago, according to the women. In their opinion, hardliners in the government are less threatened by the prospect of gender equality than the existence of any sort of "people's movement" that could form the basis of a political opposition to the regime, particularly one with ties to the West. End Summary

One Million Signatures Now Locus of Women's Rights Movement

¶2. (C) IRPO officer recently spoke separately with four leading women's rights activists from Iran who plan to attend the UN Status of Women conference in New York in early March. They said that the women's movement in Iran has finally found its footing in the form of the grass-roots One Million Signature Campaign. The Campaign's goal is to educate Iranians about the societal consequences of discriminatory laws against women and to build widespread support among Iranians for government recognition and legal protection of gender equality. Campaign members rely primarily on person-to-person education and the internet to spread their message.

¶3. (C) According to the activists, their movement is gaining momentum "faster than ever" despite the IRIG's increasingly aggressive crack-down on activists, especially those associated with the One Million Signatures Campaign. (Note: To date, 47 campaigners have been arrested; many have been sentenced to jail time and/or lashes.) They asserted that regime pressure has had the opposite effect: invigorating their cause and building support among Iranians for expansion of women's rights. The very public harassment and imprisonment of women (and the occasional man) for simply seeking improved rights is viewed by most Iranians as a disproportionate reaction on the part of the regime, and ultimately signals the hardliners' weakness rather than their strength.

¶4. (C) The activists said that most Iranians recognize that the goals of the movement are limited to improving the rights of women through the revision of laws and the "correct" implementation of laws already on the books and rights already afforded to women by the constitution. Since the mainstream movement proponents are neither challenging Iran's form of government, the stability of the current regime, nor even the supremacy of the velayat-e faqih, the government's heavy-handed approach is producing a discernable backlash against the hardliners, who are increasingly viewed as bullies by the general public. One activist noted that the lashings and jail sentences typically given to Campaigners by the revolutionary courts garner widespread sympathetic media coverage inside Iran, especially on blogs.

Hardliners Pursue "Personalized Terrorism" Against Activists

¶5. (C) A long-time activist who combines her advocacy for women's rights with activism on environmental issues described how the regime conducts "personalized terror" by relating her own experience with security agents who have been tracking her for years. She said that since her arrest in 2006 for attending a hearing of fellow activists at a revolutionary court, she has been harassed on a regular basis by MOIS agents who attempt to "control" her activities by exploiting personal information about her family. For example, she said that she is frequently subjected to prolonged interrogations that coincide with her husband's chemotherapy sessions for prostate cancer. She also alleged that the security agents tracking her discovered that her son was gay and promptly disseminated this information, leading to an "announcement" of his sexual orientation in several papers and his arrest. She stated that her son, who was a university student in Tehran, fled to Germany earlier this

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year after having been arrested three times. She assessed this harassment of family members is hardliners' greatest source of pressure, and she observed that the impunity with which the security agents operate has turned Iran into an "open prison."

Women Claim Some Successes Despite Increased Repression

¶6. (C) All four women noted that the government's tolerance for rights activists has decreased markedly since President Ahmadinejad took office in 2005. They pointed to the government's aggressive actions against campaign activists as the reason they had only been able to collect 200,000 signatures in two and a half years. Strikingly, however, they were optimistic that many of their goals would eventually be realized. One pointed out that Iranian women are "too well educated" and "too interested in the world" to be treated as inferior to males indefinitely.

¶7. (C) One founding member of the Campaign and leading opponent to the use of execution by stoning cautioned that it was wrong to think the movement hadn't made gains in recent years. She pointed to the defeat of the conservatives' attempt in 2008 to revise the family law to make multiple marriages easier as a concrete accomplishment of activists. She also attributed the decrease in executions by stoning to the women's rights movement, saying that once people became aware that stoning sentences were given to women much more frequently than to men, the public outcry over the issue became too loud for the authorities to ignore. She claimed that violations of judiciary

chief Ayatollah Shahroudi's directive banning execution by stoning were carried out by renegade local judges who knew they were acting in defiance of the government's order. She pointed out that the December 2008 stoning of two men in Mashhad was carried out in a cemetery at night was evidence of that carrying out such punishment was no longer publicly sanctioned.

"Organic" Roots Key to the Movement's Survival

18. (C) The activists all emphasized the organic roots of the women's movement, with one woman observing that "Iranians don't need help from outsiders," while another cautioned that foreign support for their activities would only confirm the regime's "paranoia" and provide a pretext for increased regime repression. According to one founding member of the Campaign, since the project's inception in 2006 they have strictly prohibited accepting money from foreign governments or organizations, although they do accept donations from individuals outside of Iran. She stated flatly that "giving money to NGOs is the worst thing the American government has done for human rights in my country since they overthrew Mosaddegh." However, she said that donations by individual American citizens have been an important source of revenue and pointed to Campaign co-founder Sussan Tahmasebi's successful fundraising in the U.S. as a critical source of the group's funding. (Note: Tahmasebi is a dual national of Iran and the United States.) She noted that only the signatures of Iranian nationals counted against the million signature goal.

19. (C) The Campaign's use of person-to-person education has also helped the movement gain traction, especially among sectors of society beyond professional women. According to one activist, the Campaign has developed a "Mothers' Committee" and a "Fathers' Committee" as their primary vehicles for conducting outreach to Iranians belonging to older generations. She said that peers are much more likely to garner the support of older Iranians than are young women, whose activism is often regarded with suspicion or fear by older Iranians.

Comment

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110. (C) Though the women unanimously expressed confidence that the movement's long-term goals for women's equality in Iran would be met, they were clearly taken aback by the audacity of the recent harassment of Shirin Ebadi, which they interpreted as a direct assault on their own operations because of her close association with the Campaign. Similarly, they were upbeat about the Campaign's ability to strengthen civil society through education and increasing public awareness, but their optimism seemed to reflect the value and importance of the cause they are pursuing rather than tangible evidence of their gains. Despite concerted efforts to portray their efforts as working within the system, the activists privately expressed skepticism that participation in the current political system could ever yield positive results. As one of the women bitterly responded when asked if she would vote in the June presidential election or if the Campaign would endorse a candidate, "it doesn't matter who is elected because the system itself is rotten."
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